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DE RUEHJM #1850/01 2811447
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
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FM AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2962
INFO RUEHKK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/WHITE HOUSE NSC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 JERUSALEM 001850

SIPDIS

NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE. NSC FOR ABRAMS/RAMCHAND/PASCUAL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/06/2023

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SUBJECT: ATERET COHANIM TAKES OVER TWO NEW PROPERTIES IN
JERUSALEM'S MUSLIM QUARTER AMIDST PALESTINIAN CRITICISM

REF: 07 JERUSALEM 02067

Classified By: Consul General Jake Walles, per reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Ateret Cohanim (AC) acquired a Palestinian apartment in the Muslim Quarter of Jerusalem's Old City and plans to open a synagogue this month near the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. The PA's Jerusalem Governor said the PA is looking into the possibility of legal irregularities in the acquisition of the apartment. He said the GoI previously rejected a petition from local residents to prevent the opening of the synagogue. Other Palestinians criticized AC's activities in the Old City. An AC spokesman told PolOff that the apartment was acquired legally and is in a building that is almost entirely owned by Jews today. He said the synagogue is being restored to its 1940s status. He said tunnels connecting the synagogue to the Western Wall Tunnel will open later. End Summary.

ATERET COHANIM ACQUIRES APARTMENT,
OPENS SYNAGOGUE IN MUSLIM QUARTER

¶2. (C) Local press reported October 6 that the settler organization Ateret Cohanim (AC) took over a Palestinian-owned apartment in the Muslim Quarter of Jerusalem's Old City. The apartment is located in the Wittenberg House, a building made famous by Ariel Sharon's purchase of an apartment there 20 years ago. Seven apartments in the building were previously acquired by Israelis, but at least two Palestinian families still live in the building.

¶3. (C) Local press announced in late September that AC will open the recently renovated Ohel Yitzhak synagogue in the Muslim Quarter, roughly 50 meters from the Western Wall Plaza and the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. According to AC spokesman Daniel Luria, the building was purchased by Jews in ¶1936. AC has spent the last year restoring the synagogue to its original appearance and will turn it over to the Western Wall Heritage Foundation after the dedication on October 12. Director of VIP Relations for the Rabbi of the Western Wall Miri Ovits told PolOff that tunnels connecting the synagogue to the Plaza will not open to the public in the near term.

PALESTINIANS CONDEMN ATERET COHANIM
ACTIVITY IN THE MUSLIM QUARTER

¶4. (C) PA Jerusalem Governor Adnan Hussein told PolOff settlers might have pressured the Palestinian owners of the apartment into selling the property, and said that the PA is looking into the possibility of legal irregularities in the transaction. He said the Waqf and local residents appealed unsuccessfully against the restoration of the synagogue several years ago, based in part on allegations that excavations were damaging homes in the Muslim Quarter. Ala

Zubari, whose house is located next to the synagogue, previously showed PolOff an area where he said excavations caused the sidewalk to cave in. He said he observed extensive tunnels leading under his and neighboring homes before settlers repaired the sidewalk.

15. (C) Jerusalem Grand Mufti Muhammad Hussein publicly warned Palestinians against selling homes to settlers and encouraged them to protect Muslim and Arab properties in Jerusalem. The Israeli Arab Aqsa Foundation publicly condemned the tunneling as taking place under Waqf land without appropriate permits or Waqf authorization.

ATERET COHANIM SPOKESMAN DEFENDS NEW PROPERTIES

16. (C) AC Spokesman Luria told PolOff October 6 that AC purchased the Wittenberg apartment legally over a year ago, but waited until this month to take possession in order to protect the previous Palestinian owners from retribution by other Palestinians -- a standard procedure for AC acquisitions, he said. Luria said he could not share information about the previous owners. He said the newly acquired apartment might house a new family, or provide additional space for one of the families already living in the building.

17. (C) Luria confirmed that American millionaire Irving Moskowitz funded the renovation of the synagogue. Luria said that the tunnels will open to the public eventually, and he hopes the opening of these tunnels will be more peaceful than the 1996 opening of the Western Wall Tunnel into the Muslim

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Quarter, which resulted in the deaths of seventy Palestinians and 16 IDF soldiers. Luria said the apartment and the synagogue are part of AC's effort to "bring back Jewish life" to the Old City.

WALLES